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Asset transfer in libraries

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Abstract

This paper explores the transfer of six libraries from local government control to management and delivery by volunteers; termed 'asset transfer'. The catalyst for transfer was cuts to local government budgets. Campaigning groups opposing closure had to quickly change to ones capable of adopting a new legal entity, preparing a business plan, running a facility and delivering a library service. This could be considered as pressurised associative democracy. A positive outcome has been the greater responsiveness to local needs. A concern is the sustainability of these transfers, in terms of volunteer commitment and long-term economic viability. Transfer of these facilities represents a transformation of the library service, but this may only be possible in areas where volunteers have high levels of social capital.

Introduction

The formation of the coalition government in 2010 and the resulting deficit reduction plan is having a profound effect on the delivery of public services in the UK. Deloitte, stated "The UK is half-way through a radical fiscal consolidation which is reducing the size of the state. Its impact on public services will be profound. With the toughest decisions yet to come," (Rodis, 2015). An ambitious target was set by the coalition to eliminate the structural deficit by 2015. Francis Maude stated "Austerity in public finances will remain a fact of life for some time to come. At the same time, public services need to keep step with the modern world" (Gov.uk, 2014). This is especially true for leisure facilities, including libraries

Local government responses to reduced budgets has been the examination of all services provided by them. Strategies include reducing service delivery; identifying efficiencies; and in some case the transfer of assets to the voluntary sector for delivery by volunteers. The transfer of public libraries is

the subject of our research. “Austerity has catalysed council efforts to find more efficient ways of working and encouraged new forms of partnership, particularly with health services. But it has also fragmented services and created barriers to collaboration due to the scarcity of resources and the strain on basic services” (Hastings, et.al, 2015) The threat to these services is continuing, in April 2015 the IMF stated that Britain’s next government will face a tougher time than expected as lower tax receipts and uncertainty surrounding the election would undermine growth forecasts. (Financial Times, 2015). The election of a Conservative majority in May 2015 has continued the policy of reducing the budget deficit. Early indications for the July 8th budget indicate that a further £13 billion cuts are required to public services (Anon, 2015). There are concerns that public services are being outsourced to an small oligopoly of big private providers, rather than allowing local volunteer led groups to run them (Williams, 2012, Civic Society, 2015).

Leisure services are vulnerable as Local Government does not have a statutory duty to provide them. Our broader study has included libraries, leisure centres and swimming pools (Nichols and Forbes, 2014; Nichols et al 2015). Libraries are different to sports and leisure facilities which have also been transferred to volunteer led groups because the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act requires local authorities to provide library provision, “It shall be the duty of every library authority to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof,” (Legislation.gov.uk, 2015). However, interpretation of the word ‘comprehensive’ is ambiguous. Another difference is that libraries’ ability to raise income by charging for services is much more limited as books are freely lent and there are minimal charges for other services. In contrast sports and leisure facilities can get close to eliminating public subsidy by charging for admission and services. A trend towards a more market oriented service was stimulated by each facility becoming a financial ‘cost centre’ and exposure to the market under compulsory competitive tendering in the 1990’s (Nichols and Taylor, 1995). This has allowed an expansion of private sector companies to run local government leisure facilities, with varying degrees of subsidy. This involvement of the private sector has not happened in libraries. However, both leisure centres and libraries have high local political profiles, meaning that councillors are very reluctant to approve a closure in their own area and are responsive to campaigning groups. Further, small local leisure centres and libraries share a strong sense of community ownership – many have existed for several generations and as both a service and a physical building have an emotional attachment that can motivate voluntary action.

Questions explored by our research include:

- What was the catalyst for transfer of libraries to volunteer led groups and the process of transfer?
- What are the characteristics of groups of volunteers who associate together to operate libraries?
- Why do they do this (*i.e.*, associate)?

- What difference has the use of volunteers made to the service provision - Does transfer of management to volunteers increase the responsiveness to local needs? Are asset transfers sustainable?

Literature

Community asset transfer is a process by which the responsibility for publically owned buildings or public service delivery is transferred to volunteer led groups. Asset transfer represents a form of “associational democracy” because the new community libraries or library associations are relatively independent of the state and are a way of providing collective goods through volunteers associating together (Nichols, et al. 2015). Through associating in groups individuals can attain a collective purpose i.e. save their library. Thus association represents an expression of collective values and a sense of civic duty (Adjacent Digital Politics, 2014). Civil society has been defined as the ‘part of society which has a life of its own, which is distinctly different from the state, and which is largely in autonomy from it’ (Shils, 2003: 29). It includes charities, social enterprises and voluntary and community groups (Cabinet Office, 2010). Boundaries around the sector are notoriously blurred, ‘baggy’ and contested definitions still vary and this can lead to discrepancies and confusion (Alcock, 2010).

Although the aspiration to create a ‘Big Society’ was notably absent in the 2015 UK general election campaign it was prominent in May 2010, when the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, stated “The time has come to disperse power more widely in Britain today.” (DCLG, 2011). Asset transfer to volunteers would fit neatly into policies to shrink the state and expand the voluntary sector within a Big Society, although a review of progress up to 2015 was largely negative (Civil Society, 2015). “Fewer people feel they can influence local decisions, disenchantment with the political system remains widespread and communities are less strong. A market-based model for reforming public services is concentrating power in the hands of new “quasi-monopoly” private sector providers rather than in those of local people and is reducing, not increasing, transparency and accountability. Despite efforts under successive governments, key public services are still failing to respond effectively to the needs of those who most need them, with stubborn educational attainment gaps and health inequalities between the richest and poorest. Social action—giving time and money to good causes and communities—has been stimulated, with some successes, but is still below levels achieved in the last decade and is not reaching the parts that need it most” (Civil Society, 2015, p 6). This is the context within which the transfer to volunteer led libraries is taking place.

Libraries are a service where centralised records allow one to see that between 2008/9 and 2012/13 there was 21% decrease in the number of paid staff and a 112% increase in the number of volunteers (Cipfa.org, 2015). Friends groups existed before recent closure threats; groups raised funds for projects; small scale book lending took place in community venues such as village halls;

pubs and residential homes. These friends groups have often provided the nucleus of campaigning organisations to preserve the library.

Methodology

A scoping exercise was undertaken from March 2014 -2015 to gather insights and information on how leisure facilities, including libraries had been affected by the period of austerity and changes in funding. Secondary research identified key literature and web sources which informed the development of an interview schedule. Interviews were carried out with representatives from Local Authorities; Volunteer Organisations Support Groups and Volunteer leisure organisations representatives. This schedule was piloted and amended after initial interviews. Questions were asked to establish the background to the organisation; the catalysts for change; the process of change; the involvement of various stakeholders e.g. Local Authority, Volunteer groups; the role of volunteers pre and post transfer; the benefits and challenges of volunteer delivery and the long term prospects and sustainability. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and /or summary notes developed. Identification of common themes is ongoing to inform the next stage of the research.

In total the scoping exercise identified over 20 examples of asset transfer. Within this scoping exercise 6 library cases were identified and in-depth interviews conducted. These are outlined in table 1.

Table 1

Council	library	Key Facts	Who interviewed
Conwy County Council	Five libraries	Five library buildings will be managed by volunteer led groups, under a 25 year lease. Groups have formed Charitable Incorporated Organisations with limited liability. Conwy appointed a Community Library Development Officer from July 2012 to develop these groups. This post runs to March 2015 and is a pilot project part-funded by the Welsh library service. The library service run from the buildings will continue to be provided by local government library staff.	Community Library Development Officer

Darlington Borough Council	Cockerton library	January 2012 Friends group formed to save library. It remained open with reduced hours but planned to close in 2016. In January 2015 decision to transfer library to volunteers coordinated by eVolution (a community support agency) from September 2015. July 2015 - Currently on hold as council has withdrawn eVolution funding	Creative Darlington; evolution
Gateshead Council	Winlaton Library Volunteer Association	In 2012 Gateshead Council identified 5 of its 17 libraries to become community –led libraries run by volunteers. As a result 5 libraries were given 2 year funding from March 2013 to March 2015. Libraries were supported in the transition by GVOC who provided training of volunteers. Gateshead council initially provided a roving librarian for any issues. Winlaton library was reopened by the WLVA in March 2013. http://www.ourgateshead.org/winlaton-library	Council rep; chair Of WLVA ; GVOC
Newcastle City Council	Jesmond Library	The library was one of the 10 from 18 identified for closure by NCC during a review in 2012. After public meetings and discussions the library was closed in June and reopened by the Friends of Jesmond Library in September 2013. It is a limited company and registered charity. The building leased from NCC. It is operated as an independent library. Users have a Jesmond library card but cannot access NCC library. Membership is free, 130 Founder members (individuals or groups) donated £100. Individuals can become friends at a cost of £20 per year http://jesmondlibrary.co.uk/	Council rep; chair; trustee/ volunteer

Sheffield City Council	Ecclesfield library	One of ten libraries run independently in Sheffield, supported by a grant from Sheffield Council. September 2013 – decision taken to close 16 and retain 12 of the city's 28 facilities as "key" libraries. Between November 2013 and June 2014 campaign groups produced a three year business plan and adopted a new legal entity. Support was provided by Voluntary Action Sheffield. Borrowers are still able to use their own library card to borrow and reserve books and use computers. Ecclesfield Library has been run from September 2014 by a friends group as an Associate Library. http://www.ecclesfieldlibrary.co.uk/	Chair of volunteer group, Voluntary Action Sheffield support worker.
Salford Council	Worsley Library	Salford Leisure services are run as a cooperative. A developmental approach aims to engender civic activism such as the local community feels ownership of the facilities. Volunteers working alongside librarians have allowed opening hours to be maintained by reorganising the librarians' shifts. In a second library volunteers helped users unfamiliar with IT use the computers to make the required applications for work as a condition of their benefits payments. This accounts for an increasing amount of librarians' time.	Chief Librarian

Results

1. The catalyst for transfer of assets and the process

In most cases the catalyst for change was the 2010 spending review with the reduction in central government funding and the budget deficit reduction targets. Local government faced the challenge

of cutting costs and finding efficiencies, which led to proposed reductions in public service provision. In Conwy the catalyst happened earlier in 2006 when the service itself was seen to be failing. Salford was slightly different: the use of volunteers enabled a library to remain open for 2 hours in the evening, where a volunteer was there alongside a librarian to ensure the librarian was not in the building alone. This enabled the hours of the librarians to be rearranged such as they could keep the library open for a period at the weekend. This allowed an adaption to budget cuts, but Salford had been committed to developing active community engagement in its leisure services as a way of enriching the community and making the services more responsive to local needs. Its leisure services were already run as a co-operative.

The process often involved a campaigning group, possibly developing from an existing friends group, who collectively attempted to voice the opinions of the local and wider communities and stakeholders.

“our energies were really just thinking about ourselves as campaign groups” Sheffield

As a result councils instigated a variety of mechanisms to consult opinions, public meetings were a popular choice, varying venues including church halls; school and local community centers. Consultations and public meetings were attended by significant numbers of the local community. In Jesmond over 200 attended such a meeting. In Conwy “The response [to potential closure] was vociferous”. In some instances working groups were set up to draw up business plans and proposals for saving the service.

An initial finding is that there is no set model. Our cases involved a range of transfer arrangements and roles of volunteers, which we have tried to fit into the 2013 Arts Council framework, Figure one, but they do not fit very neatly.

Figures 1. Cases within the Arts Council framework.

Type of model:	<u>Independent Community Library.</u> These have no public sector involvement		<u>Co- produced library</u> These are partnership models with both public sector and community involvement		
	a) Asset owning	b) Non asset owning	c) Community managed	d) Community supported	e) Commissioned community
Case	Jesmond		Gateshead Ecclesfield	Salford	

	Conwy (buildings only)				
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Adapted : Source Arts Council 2013

http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/Community_libraries_research_2013_guiding_principles.pdf

Key

a – independent community library owns its own premises, sometimes after asset transfer from local authority

b. independent community library, with no long term lease or free hold on its premises

c. – these are community led and largely community delivered, rarely with paid staff, but often with some form of ongoing council support and often still part of the public library network

d. these are council led and funded usually with paid professional staff but given significant support by volunteers

e. these are commissioned and fully funded by the council but delivered by a not for private profit community ; social enterprise or mutual organisation either existing or newly created. Council might commission individual or whole library service

Jesmond library has minimal involvement with Newcastle City Council. The library is leased from the council but receives no other direct support or funds. It is independent from the main library system so cannot use the city inter-library loans. Users register independantly with Jesmond library.

In Conwy volunteers are planned to become trustees of new organizations running the library buildings, while the service is provided by council staff – so this could be regarded as co-produced and community managed, category C, although the volunteers will run the library buildings on a lease, so this is as category A.

Ecclesfield building and the library service are run entirely by volunteers, although users still have access to the main city library stock and can use the city wide library card. In Gateshead the library stock; and IT system are managed by the council – the volunteers run day to day processes. So in both Ecclesfield and Gateshead there is little public sector involvement.

Salford fits clearly into category d, community supported.

Cockerton's arrangements have not been completed. Varied options have been discussed; management by other local charities; by a volunteer support agency or by volunteers themselves. Possibly the council are still trying to reconcile keeping a service but without paying for it.

Support for transfer was valuable for volunteer groups, but varied across cases. Conwy was unusual in that a Community Library Development Officer was appointed for five years as a pilot project. This was the only example where a development officers role was to try and develop volunteering capacity and establish new groups. It was recognized this was more difficult in less advantaged areas, so these were where more support was required. In Ecclesfield support was provided by voluntary action Sheffield after the initial friends group had formed. This included choosing and applying for an appropriate legal entity – a process which would have been even more time and energy consuming for volunteers if they had to do it themselves - a process complicated by the inconsistent approach of the charity commission. The time given by VAS exceeded that allocated in the budget. At Cockerton the local council paid a volunteer support agency to propose how a transfer would work, then to manage it, and then withdrew the contract. It appears that the council's approach was inconsistent and uncertain.

A common theme was the speed of transfer. For example, once Ecclesfield had been informed they were accepted by the council as a group to manage the library they had three months to prepare a business plan to cover the next three years. An impression is that local government has delayed grasping an awkward political nettle of asset transfer – the inevitable replacement of paid staff with volunteers – which has meant the process once started has to take place rapidly. However, this will not give time to develop volunteering capacity – especially in areas where it is low.

2. What are the characteristics of groups of volunteers who feel they can associate together to operate library facilities?

Volunteers are characterised by high stocks of social capital (a pool of relevant skills), a sense of efficacy, and a strong sense of community and identification with a facility.

Volunteers who campaigned for closure did not necessarily transfer to become active volunteers managing the library. The key to successful association can be dependent on the diverse volunteer characteristics which include their level of education; gender; age; family background; employment status; psychographic and socio- demographic variables.

For example, Jesmond Library Chair had been an accountant and one of the trustees had a background in the library service. *"we have a number of different people running if you like specific aspects of the business."* Jesmond Trustee

Several of the members and trustees of Jesmond library are also trustees of Jesmond Community leisure which has run Jesmond pool for over 20 years – thus had very relevant experience.

As in sports clubs, parents of users were a source of volunteers. At Winlaton, the Chair had brought his children to the library. Children were accompanied by parents after school. Volunteers also were from those who had an interest or hobby that closely aligned with the facility, the library was a place where generations of local people had borrowed books and continued to so. A relatively stable local population pool was important to draw volunteers from. Few of the volunteers lived outside the area and travelled in. Most were within walking distance. Cockerton during its campaign to save the library identified over 150 local residents as volunteers. Jesmond's student population meant student volunteers were available but only for episodic, university linked or short term projects.

3. Why do they do this (i.e., associate)?

Unlike much previous research on volunteer motivation ours is based purely on interviews, and only within one or two representatives at each library. However, in all the cases the main motivation of volunteers was initially to save the provision of their local library service. As a local physical facility, used by generations, it was able to attach sentiments one might not expect of a public service without these characteristics. One cannot imagine the same public sentiments being attached to traffic wardens or dog wardens!

4. What difference has the use of volunteers made to the service provision - Does transfer of management to volunteers increase the responsiveness to local needs?

After transfer the libraries made efforts to be seen as more market and community oriented. Through governance they had the ability to define their mission and direction of the organisation. An analysis of the organisations web sites stresses the direction, aspirations and more importantly the involvement and power of the local community.

"FoEL serves the public in the district of Ecclesfield, the City of Sheffield, and its surrounding area, by providing a community lending library, and associated services. We are doing this by associating together residents, local authorities, voluntary and other organisations, in a common effort to provide facilities in the interests of social welfare for recreation and leisure time occupation with the object of improving the conditions of life for the residents" Web site

Post transfer at an operational level the trustees and volunteers demonstrated a clear awareness of the needs of the local community. Research enabled them to review the current facilities and elicit local opinion. Knowledge and understanding of the local market enables control over pricing and programming of facilities to take advantage of the sensitivity to the local market needs. The library services and opening hours were reviewed. A separate study of community libraries in rural Cumbria found a similar flexibility to adapt to local circumstances (Sen, 2014).

Offering new additional services and facilities included a coffee machine in Jesmond; Craft clubs; visiting speakers;

“We want to run lots of projects from it that get the community really involved so that its open 7 days a week with lots of activities in there” eVolution

Expanding and diversifying use met two related objectives. By making the building more responsive to community needs – the term ‘community hub’ was often used, so more users would be attracted. This would develop the sense of ownership of the facility which would be required to recruit more volunteers in the future. Ecclesfield library talked about attracting new groups: *We should have a games club, educational games club maybe and develop activities where older people and younger people can swap skills so whether it’s computing, whether it’s craft based, getting them interested.*

At the same time, for the libraries to be self-sustaining income had to be generated. Traditionally the libraries had minimal earned income. Further, costs could be reduced by simple efficiencies which could be put in place because of the flexibility of local management and the direct incentive to save any unnecessary cost.

Conclusions

The library case studies we have looked at, do indeed exemplify associationalism, coming together to meet their own and local community needs, more efficiently and sensitively, prompted by state retraction from library provision. Volunteers are emerging to take on the role of delivering the library service. But this is associationalism with a gun to one’s head – volunteers have a choice of volunteering or having no local library!

Asset transfer in our libraries is being led by a core of committed volunteers. Within these there need to be those with high levels of confidence and efficacy, and skills – or a willingness to learn them. Once a group has expressed an interest, the work to be done to effect transfer is rapid and intensive, at least from the perspective of the volunteers. This raises the question – will such transfers only be viable in areas of high social capital, leaving others with no local library service. Volunteers are motivated by localism, rather than wider regional concerns - willing to volunteer at the local library but unlikely to travel outside the area to another library. The Big Society extends as far as their own ‘back yard’. This maybe pragmatic as all their time and energy has to be focused on their own facility. Some of our cases had obtained helpful advice from other libraries which had

transferred, so this suggests that once established volunteers will be prepared to give time, at least to give advice to others.

All examples showed a genuine transfer of power to the community groups, evidenced through strategic and operational management control. The cases acknowledge that a business and entrepreneurial focus is being developed, in particular to develop multiple income streams; but aligned with a genuine desire to engage and serve the local community.

This changing notion of state involvement in library provision is likely to be long term. There is a need to further understand the voluntary service that is, in some cases, replacing state provision, and to identify the scenarios that make associating together more likely to happen, more successful at transfer and more sustainable. Another factor for consideration is whether these groups are preventing a reduction in provision or providing a service of a distinctive quality compared to public sector delivery, as our findings suggest.

The cases clearly illustrate and support Ashleys (2014) statement that “to remain successful libraries have adapted and innovated to remain an essential part of their local community”

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